



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

*THE PERIL OF A SAFE THEOLOGY*

HERBERT ALDEN YOUTZ

AUBURN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The multiplication of safety appliances for the protection of human life is a marked characteristic of our age. No humane ministry to society is more consistently and forcefully urged than the providing of automatic safety-devices to supplant the older method of reliance upon personal attention and intelligence. "Such accidents will happen until we eliminate the whole human element by means of automatic provisions," observed a railroad operator after a recent disaster. He followed the statement with an informing discussion concerning the installing of safety-appliances on his own line of road, in response to the demands of the public conscience. There is always a position and a premium for the inventive genius who can substitute for fallible human attention an automatic response that works infallibly. The disabled switchman, the drunken watchman, the recreant employee, can be more and more dispensed with as his services are supplied by the mechanical device which never sleeps nor drinks whiskey, and whose integrity does not call for any subjective processes. Lives of employees and of patrons by the thousands are thus guarded and saved every year. And the principle is so humane and sound that we do not propose to halt while inventive skill is unexhausted or the reluctant employer remains unpunished.

Our object here is not to question the beneficence of these things; we are concerned rather with a by-product. What are the moral consequences of safety devices—their effect upon character? and what are the limitations of mechanical safety in the complex and responsible activities of human achievement? Does the elevator man become a more or a less responsible person when he feels that not his own skill and attention, but an automatic device, stands between his passengers and disaster? Do railway employees, when relieved of personal responsibility, develop the types of character that under the old system fitted them to advance as conductors, engineers, and managing officers? What is the effect

upon a board of directors of knowing that they have provided "every device for the safety and comfort of their patrons"? In short, does the movement contribute to responsible character or does it not?

These questions are not asked from a wholly academic point of view. I would not curtail practical efforts to reduce risks by safety appliances, but I am apprehensive of the results of safety produced at the cost of all human sentiment, and I raise the question whether in the long run it is not possible for the impersonal and the practical to defeat its own ends and suffer a practical revenge. For in the end the control of automatism is in the hands of personality, and real safety is secured for us only through the sentiment which is developed in the life of the men who own and control automatic devices.

The question is of course only a special aspect of the problem which the ideals of mechanism always create when they invade the realm of the personal. Wherever automatism carries its ideals too far, something very precious and fundamental in human life is threatened. In the boy set to watch the primitive steam-engine, who discovered that he could so attach the levers that they would operate the steam-valves mechanically and thus dispense with his attention to them, we have the symbol of a racial experience quite as fateful in its potential influence upon human kind as the experience symbolized by the venerable tradition of the forbidden fruit and its resultant catastrophe.

As the aim of this discussion is to investigate and not to dogmatize, we shall content ourselves with indicating certain points where the demand for automatic safety threatens to obscure or defeat some of the finer issues of life.

In a thoughtful piece of literature, "The Preliminaries," contributed by Miss Comer to the *Atlantic Monthly* for October, 1910, we have a convincing illustration, in terms of life, of the universal demand for automatic safety, and its intrinsic weakness. The story deals with the fortunes of two lovers who are held back from the consummation of their hearts' desire by prudential considerations urged on both sides. Fond parents, admitting the obvious fitness of the marriage, at the same time poison the atmosphere of the romance as well as the peace of their own lives by dread

apprehensions of possible miscarriage of plans or fatal taint or weakness of character. The objections raised are not definite and positive, but are only formulations of the general lack of certainty involved in all dealing with the future. They tacitly demand guaranteed insurance against all possible evil before life can be sanctioned and accepted as blessed. The apprehensions are aggravated by a grim tragedy of justice that has overtaken the head of one family and embittered life. The natural consequence is that all concerned are living on the verge of nervous prostration. All see life's problems through morbid eyes and with fretful spirits. All save one. The father of the woman, a convict behind prison walls, has learned in suffering and meditation the true philosophy of life—the philosophy of life's inevitable risks. He reverses the nervous prudential counsel of the others, with their nameless fear for the future. The highest point of the dramatic movement of the story is his counsel addressed to the youth, who visits him in prison on the delicate mission of asking for the hand of his daughter:

They haven't the point of view. It is life that is the great adventure. Not love, not marriage, not business. They are just chapters in the book. The main thing is to take the road fearlessly,—to have courage to live one's life. . . . That is the great word. Don't you see what ails your father's point of view, and my wife's? One wants absolute security in one way for Ruth; the other wants absolute security in another way for you. And security—why it's just the one thing a human being cannot have, the thing that's the damnation of him if he gets it! The reason it is so hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven is that he has that false sense of security. To demand it just disintegrates a man. I don't know why,—it does. . . . The mastery of life comes with the knowledge of our power to endure. That's it. You are safe only when you can stand everything that can happen to you. Thus and thus only! Endurance is the measure of the man. . . . Courage is security. There is no other kind.

Very like in kind is the philosophy uttered in a "Sketch of Life on the Road" by a wandering philosopher:<sup>1</sup>

How can any man look for true adventure in life if he always knows to a certainty where his next meal is coming from? In a

<sup>1</sup> David Grayson, in the *American Magazine* for November, 1912, page 6.

world so completely dominated by goods, by things, by possessions, and smothered by security, what fine adventure is left to a man of spirit save the adventure of poverty?

Now I am not an apologist for the convict, nor for the picturesque, ecclesiastical, mendicant saint; nor yet for the less picturesque and unecclesiastical mendicant sinner. But the point of view of life as an adventure points to a principle of faith—faith and strength and insight born of the needs of the moment—which seems to me a neglected factor in many of our closed and rigid systems of interpretation of life. For every specific spiritual situation as it arises there is a new insight born of the new experience. No standardized interpretation expresses the whole truth of such an hour. Like the manna of the wilderness, if we try to preserve our spiritual truth for days ahead, it spoils on our hands. Faith is the only mental attitude that overcomes the world—not security! The voluntary acceptance of life seems somehow to precede and condition our proofs and certainties. We have in the citations given, if I mistake not, recognition of the subtle evil involved in an excessive demand to surround life with safety devices. Security, whether purchased by riches or rank or rationalism or other automatic means of safety, tends to create a sense of ease which is the menace of the soul. We must work out our salvation in any realm, if we want the distinctive reward of that realm. Certain personal capacities and creative moral insights and sympathies shrink and shrivel when they are over-subsidized by external securities.

One effect of the demand for automatic safety is seen in the history of the mightiest and most precious impulse of life, the religious nature. The larger half of Christendom is organized on the principle that we need an infallible guidance for life; that religion, with its issues of eternal life and death, is too fateful a matter to be trusted to the limitations of our hard-won wisdom; that here at least we must know before we act. We are all familiar with the mechanical logic by which J. H. Newman satisfied his soul that there must be somewhere an automatic safety-device for religious hearts longing for certainty. That logic led Newman into the only ecclesiastical fellowship which guaranteed infallible guidance. The guarantee of safety first, life and trust

afterward—millions of people nominally allege this principle as fundamental and inevitable in life's deepest concerns. Of course, history alone can vindicate or disprove its merits, and the history is open to us all.

On the other hand, the Protestant wing of Christendom is in nominal revolt against external religious guarantees, and avows its purpose to rest life upon faith, which shall win its own certainties. But alas for the logic of Protestantism, there is an unformulated dialectic in human nature which leads straight back to the safety-device. A hundred years or so after the Protestant movement had challenged the automatic safety of the Catholic church in the name of "salvation by faith," the Bible appeared in the light of "an infallible rule of faith and practice"; and either avowedly or nominally that is the rôle which the Christian Scriptures play in the religious life of the multitude today. We will have a safety contrivance to guard personal life in its deepest issues. We will have Authority as the highest court of appeal. Either Holy Church or Holy Bible must furnish a principle of infallible security. The consequences for Protestant theology of thus dealing with the Bible as a "divinely given revelation"—an authoritative text-book—and not as a transcript of the realities of human experience in its religious development have been immense. Surely the theologies of the future will trust the revelations of God that come to the moral heroes of old, even though we test their knowledge of spiritual things by the same psychological and epistemological canons that we bring to our own religious experiences.

We have protested against the flaunting of guaranteed salvation announced over church doors: "*Plena indulgentia quotidie*." That smacks of commercialism and legalism. But many who shudder at the principle thus brazenly published, offer to furnish the same brand of safety in subscriptions to various orthodoxies, and thus to bring into life a sense of peace and security. For our constituency demand both security and large returns before they will invest. This is the underlying philosophy of every "safe" orthodoxy.

Again, in the very citadel of faith, where religion professes to achieve the personal assurance of unseen realities, this demand

for independent, safeguarding principles haunts us. With curious infidelity to the personal confidence in a supreme living Spirit which is the essence of the best religion, the church has yet cherished the intellectual "proof" of God as a buttress and bulwark of her faith, and we have felt secure only when the burden of our certainty was seen to rest not upon faith but upon an independent and universal basis. The "direct and fundamental proofs" have thus tended to supplant the faith upon which we once felt that true religion should rest. The moral consequences of theistic proofs have not been more salutary than those of the safety of infallible guidance, whether supplied by a church or a book. Thus one keen critic says:<sup>2</sup>

It has grown clear to all thinkers, first, that the God and soul of religion cannot be proved with proofs that compel the assent of the intellect, and secondly, that by such proofs there is, in a serious degree, the destruction of the values which are sought to be demonstrated.

Now faith does not come at the suggestion of distrust, but of trust. A safety-device here seems an affront both to reason and to faith. The intellect must indeed offer its fortifying reasons, but the prior and deeper reason of faith takes precedence of all specific reasons. In living contact with spiritual reality the soul finds the irrefutable argument for God, and any proof which absolves the soul from this original vision of God weakens the case which it seeks to establish. No rationalism can take the place of the Moral Venture.

This study of the effect of a principle might be carried into nearly every department of life, for religion is not alone in this error. The field of education is likewise infested with the fallacy of orthodox methods, mechanical devices to guarantee that every child shall be pedagogically "saved." The "system" sometimes stimulates and sometimes paralyzes the individual response of the "Child." In the field of law, too, justice is often defeated rather than established by professional orthodoxies; while in politics machine methods are widely employed to relieve the individual of personal attention and responsibility,—to the demoralization

<sup>2</sup> Professor George Burman Foster, *The Function of Religion*, page 85.

of the citizen. These all illustrate the tendency to apply mechanical standards to life, to secure automatic safety, and to this extent to imperil and defeat the higher spiritual achievements of the race. The best condition of such achievement is the absence of these very safeguards and certainties, which are in no way wrung out of the deep experiences of life; for the law of the spiritual is faith. No absolutions or indulgences are known to the moral law. The paradoxical truth is that every man must bear his own burden, even though he must also bear the burdens of others. The certainties of spiritual reality do not rest upon independent ground, but are conditioned by our own moral response to life, and the highest spiritual discernment is not merely imitative: it is creative.<sup>3</sup> The interpreter of religion, of law, or of pedagogy must be something more than a copyist. Even a lawyer ought to be a prophet; but a theologian or a teacher must be one.

Now when in our preaching and teaching we so far disregard this principle of faith and freedom that we tacitly standardize our theology, we do so in response to the demand for an automatic safety-device. This substitution of a mechanical theology for a spiritual is based upon a fallacious theory of knowledge, and it works harm. It is founded upon a bad philosophy and a shallow analysis of the whole problem of knowledge. For when our interpretation of spiritual truth is conditioned upon all sides by theories of sacred history, inspiration, infallible sources, divine tokens, revealed truth, and safe standards of doctrine, we virtually so subsidize our thinking about spiritual reality that a healthy spirituality and a stalwart theology are hardly possible. A really safe theology, like a safe chemistry, is one which faces the facts of life and their laws, and gives the profoundest account of them of which the mind is capable. It recognizes that the law of life is growth, and asks no other guarantee than that of faithful living and faithful thinking.

We have thus far dealt chiefly with the intrinsic fallacy of the safety method in religious interpretation. But it would not be hard to show, on the practical side, that a mechanical ideal in

<sup>3</sup> Professor Bergson's characteristic and fruitful emphasis has to do with the essentially creative nature of the ethical.



place of a spiritual ideal of religious interpretation is a menace to religious effectiveness. We may here simply enumerate two or three points at which a "safe theology" imperils the interests of "the Gospel which is committed to our trust."

The christianizing of the Orient in this missionary age requires a recognition of types of mind and types of meaning which a rigid theological method does not recognize. If Jesus Christ and his message of God's love is to dominate and save Eastern civilizations with their millions of needy people, they must be allowed to reinterpret our blessed gospel in forms of life and thought which our orthodoxies do not know, and we must recognize the heterodox ways in which God is already manifesting himself in the hearts of these people. We imperil a world message by parochial thinking. "There are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all." Does this not mean that the God who works in Islam and in Buddhism is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? It may well be that the truth of God and his Son will come back to us from the East with new depths of insight which our formulations never perceived. No rigid orthodoxy can deal sympathetically with this racial problem.

Again, a formal and safe theology is ineffective in dealing with the marvellous developments of ethical, social, economic, and industrial life about us. Christianity and the church are, measurably at least, losing the most splendid opportunity that history has offered to spiritualize life and bring to it the vision and the power of God in Christ, because we insist that the profound modern movements must conform to our orthodox interpretation of Christianity, formulated under the influence of other social ideals. Thank God for prophetic men in the ministry who get their vision of God and the spiritual meaning of Christ in the life of today; whose measure of the divine revelation and redemption is not a safe orthodoxy, but the whole range of human need, the whole development of human life. Thank God for ministers of Christ who see that the social life of today is as much God's as the social life of the past; who believe that God speaks to us and leads us as directly and authoritatively in our thought and life as he has spoken in the thought which we have inherited

from the past, so inspiringly set forth in our Bibles. When we face this truth squarely, we shall no longer raise such issues as "Christianity or socialism," and "Christianity or economic reform," but our Christianity will be seen to include all these problems and the principles for their solution as well. Christ will still be seen as our spiritual Leader and Inspirer.

There is also a peril to the highest life of the church in measuring its spiritual possibilities in terms of an orthodox theology. I will not speak of the formalism which so easily besets ecclesiastical organizations, but rather of the danger to creative spiritual leadership. In a conception of spiritual truth and of theology which absolves the minister from profound religious thinking upon the deepest concerns of life there is an intellectual menace which must affect also the preacher's spiritual vision and the character of his message. One cannot enter the deep original vision of the meaning of spiritual things without first thinking things through in terms of fundamental principles. We do not require mere dispensers of second-hand visions. We do not need preachers who can demonstrate that God was in the thought and life of the past so much as we need those who can reveal a living God in the thought and life of today. These fundamental things are matters of present insight, personally achieved. Theology needs to be moralized along the whole line of her doctrines, but at no point is the need so critical as in this matter of her angle of approach—the intellectual method—which shall control the religious interpreter.

There is a mysterious but very precious doctrine of our Christian faith which sets forth in a positive way the very truth of which we have been speaking; that is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. "He will guide you into all truth." Theology must rely upon personal guidance, not mechanical control. Living guidance for living men, by the Spirit of the living God! The sin against the Holy Ghost is the great sin in the Christian list. *It is the distrust of present guidance that throws a man back upon theological safety-devices.* Real security in spiritual interpretation comes only from the present, free operation of the Spirit of Truth. Living guidance for thought and life can never harden into a code or orthodoxy. The only orthodoxy that is safe is this

same Holy Spirit, eternally at work in the interpretations of men, eternally deepening our vision of God and the meaning of life. The truth of the Holy Spirit, effectually studied and practised, would render unnecessary this earnest protest against a safe theology. But, alas, the tendency has been to measure and standardize the very doctrine itself, in forgetfulness of the truth that God "giveth not the Spirit by measure."

In conclusion, if there is a peril in a safe theology, what is the theological method which will best serve the church and its Lord? It is the method which speaks out of a rich and profound spiritual experience, which has a sympathetic and intelligent understanding of the spiritual history of the past and of the spiritual life of today, and which trusts the accepted methods of sound thinking to guide its rational interpretations of spiritual reality. Christian theology is the type of theology which makes Christ's spirit the supreme test and dominating principle in setting a value on the facts of history and of life, as well as in interpreting their spiritual significance. In the frank employment of this method, the standardizing method of a "safe theology" would have no place; and without the method of rational and spiritual freedom, no orthodoxy is safe.